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ABSTRACT

Arguing that language is the foundation of work in Reading Recovery, this article discusses the role of language from several different perspectives. The first section discusses the role of language in literacy learning. The second section deals with the role of language intervention in supporting learning. The role of language in creating learning networks is the topic of the third section, and the role of language in supporting quality implementation is discussed in the fourth. Finally, the fifth section deals with language, relationships, and maintaining the community. It discusses barriers to community and to forming educational partnerships, and how language and conversation can help to overcome them. (SR)

The Language Foundation of Reading Recovery.

by Gay Su Pinnell

THE LANGUAGE FOUNDATION OF READING RECOVERY

Excerpted from a keynote address to the Third International Reading Recovery Institute, Cairns, Australia 1998

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Reading Recovery is a discourse community that includes children, parents, Reading Recovery and classroom teachers as well as administrators, school board members, and the school community. Conversations within this discourse community prompt and support learning and change. Over the last two decades, teachers have found in Reading Recovery an opportunity to talk about their teaching of children. These conversations span the world, crossing the boundaries of schools, districts, states and provinces, nations, continents, and languages. This discourse, the depth and richness of it, is a phenomenon in modern education. Our conversations and the quality of dialogue among us created this continuing learning community.

I believe that language is the foundation of our work in Reading Recovery. In this article I will discuss the role of language from several different perspectives.

1. *The role of language in literacy learning*. Reading and writing are language processes. The powerful systems of oral language serve as primary resources for young children in constructing the inner control that is involved in becoming literate.

2. *The role of language interactions in supporting children's learning*. Through learning conversations we support children's development of effective strategies in reading and writing.

3. *The role of language in creating learning networks*. Through our ongoing dialogue, we, as teachers, support each other's learning. This dialogue supports us in taking on complex ideas.

4. *The role of language in supporting quality implementation of Reading Recovery*. We use language to talk about how Reading Recovery works. Different contexts call for different conversations; yet, quality must be maintained across all Reading Recovery sites. Dialogue across sites solves problems and refines the implementation of Reading Recovery as times change.

At all of these levels, the challenge is to recognize the complexity of language, language learning, and the social context for language use. If we recognize complexity, we will understand that simplistic solutions and quick fixes just don't work and we can better support each other in our long-term efforts.

1. The Role of Language in Literacy Learning

In Reading Recovery, we understand reading and writing as language processes. We are constantly engaging in a cycle of observation, analysis, and interaction to assist young readers in making connections among these language systems in pursuit of meaning as they read and in the construction of texts that they have composed.

We are all familiar with the diagram on page 42 of the *Guidebook*. The four boxes and the arrows help us think about these interacting systems. Does it make sense? Does it look right? Can we say it that way? What can you hear? What do you expect to see?

Inherent in the sources of information are the powerful language systems on which our meanings are built. Language is not divided and linear. We use categories to talk about these sources of information to help us understand them. The semantic system refers to *meaning*. Language is useful and makes sense. The syntactic system refers to the rules of language *structure*—the grammar. The phonological refers to the *sound* system of the language—what you hear—while the orthographic system refers to what you *see*—the patterns of spelling. All of these systems work together in complex but patterned ways.

In Reading Recovery, we work very hard to help children use all of these sources of information in a coordinated and integrated way. As Clay (p. 20) has said, "The intricately patterned behaviors related to visual perception and language must be linked." Sources of information are, at first, linked in very individual ways as children build the networks of understanding that fuel further learning. The focus is on meaning. The young reader learns to relate the flow of spoken language sounds to the visual patterns placed in order across the page.

2. The Role of Language Intervention in Supporting Learning

As teachers we are challenged to make the superb decisions that assist the child in becoming an active processor. These decisions include basic choices such as:

- selection of book
- guiding sentence selection
- choice of words to help the child analyze in writing or reading

The fact that the Reading Recovery lesson is largely devoted to the child's reading and writing continuous text is well documented through detailed analyses of time. These decisions also include the construction of discourse present in the lesson. The Reading Recovery lesson is biased—as the guidebook indicates—toward text. The great majority of the lesson engages the child in reading or writing continuous text—this has actually been verified through research counting the minutes.

These encounters with text are surrounded by the language that supports the learning. Part of teaching is deciding what to

continued on next page

THE LANGUAGE FOUNDATION OF READING RECOVERY —

continued from previous page

say and when to say it. In making those decisions the teacher structures the learning through conversation. Reading Recovery provides the field of education with demonstrations of learning conversations.

These learning conversations cannot be scripted or imitated precisely. The conversations arise from:

- *What we notice.* Through close observation and interpretation of behavior, we build knowledge in our heads. This knowledge is built over time and altered daily because we are always learning more about the children we teach.
- *What we know.* Through our work with children, our classes, and our study, we build the knowledge we have of the reading and writing processes.
- *How we interact.* As Reading Recovery teachers we develop a repertoire of ways of interacting with children. This repertoire is related to our understanding of language processes and has some special qualities. Sometimes, we refer to "prompts," meaning the precise ways we direct children's attention while reading. In fact, some visitors to Reading Recovery sites and some professionals who look casually at Reading Recovery lessons, think that Reading Recovery is a set of prompts, and they write them down as if recording a script. It's even been suggested that a computer program could be created for teaching. You just tap in the running record and the "right" prompt flashes up on the screen. This technology has its attractions, but the software would be a crude instrument indeed compared to the human brain and the way people use language. It would be a bit like having a hairdresser cut your hair with a chain saw.

In Reading Recovery lessons children quickly learn that the teacher's language is useful to them in solving the puzzles of written language.

Talk is purposeful and as teachers we use self discipline to avoid filling the lesson with teacher talk. We use language to demonstrate, point to valuable information, reinforce and encourage effective behaviors, and prompt action.

A prompt is a call to action, something the child knows and can do. For prompts to be powerful, the child must have an understanding of what you mean and be able to act on it. A teacher is prompting for actions that have been taught to the child by asking the child to perform the action.

Research recently completed by Emily Rodgers (1998) indicates that a teacher can be prompting and actually using the languages in the *Guidebook* but not teaching as powerfully as possible. Refining teaching in Reading Recovery means carefully analyzing prompts and teaching. The critical issue is whether the prompt—the language—was powerfully used in a way that supports learning for this particular child.

We may use prompts but by action and voice undermine them. All of us have had the experience of a smooth interaction with insights, discoveries, and acceleration with one child and felt clumsy with another. We may need to go back and think not only about what we say but about what we are trying to teach this particular child. The language flows from that.

3. The Role of Language in Creating Learning Networks

A further use of language is in helping each other learn as professionals. Reading Recovery is an investment in the professional skills of teachers. A large-scale study (cited in Askew, et. al., 1998, *Reading Recovery Review*, Reading Recovery Council of North America) revealed that every additional dollar spent on raising teacher quality netted greater student achievement gains than did any other use of school resources. Few educational programs offer a more powerful teacher education process than Reading Recovery.

Reading Recovery teachers learn to make teaching decisions "on the run" while teaching. Research on Reading Recovery teaching (O'Flahavan, cited in *Reading Recovery Review*, Reading Recovery Council of North America) indicates that Reading Recovery teachers seem to know "just what to do" in response to individual children. Working from what the child knows and finding powerful examples make the teaching efficient and provide for acceleration. The extensive training allows the teacher to develop a repertoire of actions and decisions and then to adjust each child's program based on strengths. Through their shared experience in training class, teachers build solid base.

Carol Lyons (1994) has provided us with some detailed research on the development of teachers' thinking and decision making. She has found that we do learn procedures and specific language and at first we may work awkwardly, getting accustomed to using the language and trying at the same time to observe the child. But through daily teaching analysis and reflection, and with guidance from others, the procedures become more automatic, thus freeing attention to observation of the child's behavior and allowing language to be used with greater precision. The skills and knowledge a teacher develops in Reading Recovery contribute to his or her ongoing learning and result in an impact on children across time.

4. The Role of Language in Supporting Quality Implementation

Finally, we use language to maintain and describe Reading Recovery in a way that sustains quality, builds common vision and communicates about what we do. Quality implementation is essential. Well-planned implementation is the real arbiter of success in Reading Recovery.

Smart administrators protect their investment by assuring a high quality implementation of Reading Recovery. Consideration must be given to the processes involved in "opening up" the system to accommodate and support this innovation. It involves problem-solving the placement of the intervention into an existing education system.

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THE LANGUAGE FOUNDATION OF READING RECOVERY—

continued from previous page

Implementation is important in any venture. "The failure to institutionalize an innovation and build it into the normal structures and practices of the organization underlies the disappearance of many reforms. In too many cases, where ideas deserve consideration, the processes through which they were implemented were self defeating." (Wilson & Daviss, 1994)

Reading Recovery does not leave implementation to chance. Although systems are still being examined and refined, a structured process exists to assist local educators in implementing a consistent, high quality program.

Language, Relationships, and Maintaining the Community

When I was in my early years of teaching I read a book by Knobloch called *The Lonely Teacher*, now out of print. The premise of the book was that in many schools, teachers work in little boxes strung like beads down long halls. They shut their doors; many don't go in the common areas or if they do, they talk about the football game or weekend activities. Challenging and exciting discussions of their work, along with mutually supportive, straight talk about teaching, are largely missing.

When I read the book, I thought, "That's right!" I rarely had conversations with my colleagues about learning. Maybe things have changed, but I believe that many teachers still do not have the collegiality that they need and deserve in order to do their best teaching.

Reading Recovery offers us a supportive larger community. We love getting together with other Reading Recovery teachers. But each of us is also a member of a school staff. We need to be a collegial part of this community, to make new partnerships, and strengthen the partnerships we have. We need to remove some of the potential barriers that divide us. Think about your school. What are some of those barriers that we need to use language and conversation to overcome?

- Are there divisions between the Reading Recovery teachers, other reading teachers, and classroom teachers?
- Are there divisions by grade level?
- Are there divisions between special area teachers and classroom teachers, between parents and teachers, between the building administrator and the teachers, between the left hall and the right hall?

If we intend to teach all children, these barriers must be reduced and overcome. As a Reading Recovery teacher who cares about the community and about children, you may have to take the first step.

Think about what you have to do to become a partner with any individual—in a family, in marriage, as a friend, with your colleague next door. It's pretty simple:

- I have to listen and try to see the world from that person's perspective.
- I have to give up some of my own ideas, my control and my status.
- I may have to commit myself to open communication, no matter how hard that is.
- I will have to share the credit, and the credit is rightly shared because no child learns without shared responsibility. If the sun shines, it shines on everyone.
- I have to pitch in; in good schools, no one says "it's not my job" when something important has to be done or a crisis arises.

I have to remove territoriality and competitiveness. In a school, for example, instead of talking about "my children," we could set the goal of talking about "our children." Every group of children which enters the school is subject not just to *my* teaching but to *our* teaching. That means we have to think about the whole educational program for *every* child. The advantages of partnership may not be clear at first but it enhances and brings more satisfaction and fun into teaching. Acting as partners, teachers can help each other develop greater skills and reduce ineffective practice.

One of the first articles about Reading Recovery was entitled, "Learning How to Make a Difference." When Rose Mary Estice, Mary Fried, and I wrote that article, we presented some of the data on Reading Recovery along with our own perspectives. But the part of the article that most people remember is the story of Dante, one of Rose Mary's first Reading Recovery students. She kept in touch with him over the years.

Originally one of the very lowest achieving first graders, Dante came from a family with many personal and economic problems, including the tragic death of one of his siblings. By fourth grade, he had moved five times, but he was motivated to seek out his neighborhood library and check out books on his own. Dante was a reader and we believe that Reading Recovery made a difference in his life. He didn't make top grades but he maintained a solid B average. This year, he is a junior in college.

This vulnerable young child was empowered by literacy. He has been, over the years, heroic in his pursuit of literacy and education. Of course he had other supports at home and at school because Reading Recovery does not do the whole job. But the story of Dante and of the hundreds of thousands of children in our national data base provide personal evidence to teachers that Reading Recovery works. To us, these children are not statistics. Each is a person, an individual. Each represents the investment of 30 to 50 hours of intensive teaching and countless other hours of worrying and thinking by one of you, sometimes at 4:30 a.m. That's our investment in the future.

Reading Recovery provides some clear demonstrations that make our continuing conversation critically important.

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THE LANGUAGE FOUNDATION OF READING RECOVERY —

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- We can see the reading and writing processes going wrong in the first year of instruction.
- We can use reliable measure to identify causes of problems.
- We can identify children's strengths.
- We can trace the subtle shifts that indicate progress for an individual.
- We can assist those children having difficulty to develop the same processing behaviors that good readers and writers have.

Since we can do it, we are obligated to do it. Literacy is not a privilege. It is a right. It is every child's right, whether rich or poor. Justice demands literacy. And we, as teachers, find ourselves in the position of arbiters of that right and that justice.

If we are to improve education for large numbers of children, we must face the fact that there is no quick solution for our schools. We are required as educators to take what we know to be effective, to refine it, fine tune it, and extend the boundaries of our knowledge to create systems that work for our children. It will take time, resources, and enormous effort, but we have already come halfway. When I first became involved in Reading Recovery, I thought it was too hard. I now realize that we were beginning to learn what it's going to take if we are to move all children - not just some - into independent and competent literacy.

Educators and policy makers are realizing that reaching educational excellence will take more than a few weekend or summer workshops. We must remake education to create classrooms that usher young children into literacy in joyful and purposeful ways! To do that, we need long-term support for teachers. Each one must construct a theory of how children learn and develop ways of acting on that theory. Ultimately, we must construct these understandings and make these decisions for ourselves. In Reading Recovery we are lucky that our discourse community already supports the learning.

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